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Environment Department to Crack Down on Number One Threat to Groundwater

(Santa Fe, NM) — In order to better protect the state's precious water resources and the health of residents, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has increased its vigilance over septic systems on small lots. Lots of less than $\frac{3}{4}$ acres in size will be closely scrutinized by the Department before a permit to install a septic system is approved. If the lot in question is in an area with a highly vulnerable body of water, a traditional septic system may be deemed inappropriate and an advanced treatment system will likely be required.

"By more clearly and consistently enforcing the existing liquid waste regulations for smaller lots, the Department will ensure that both public health and the environment are protected," said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. "Studies have shown that septic tanks are the number one threat to groundwater in New Mexico. Malfunctioning septic systems have contaminated more acre-feet of groundwater and more supply wells than all other pollution sources combined. As the State's protector of water quality, we need to ensure that this resource will remain available today and for future generations. Virtually everything this Department does touches water in some way."

Traditional septic systems are a suitable means of waste disposal in many rural areas of the state where lot sizes are large enough for contaminants to be filtered and diluted to acceptable levels. Using scientific studies, however, the Department has determined that traditional septic systems on lots of less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre can pollute groundwater with pathogens, nitrate, and/or anoxic conditions. These types of pollution are a threat to human health and can seriously impair the quality of life.

Consumption of well water with high nitrate can cause "blue baby syndrome," a rare but potentially fatal disease affecting infants less than six months old, and bladder cancer in women. Symptoms of blue baby syndrome, which has been documented in New Mexico, include blueness of the skin and shortness of breath. Anoxic pollution can cause severe taste, odor, and staining problems, and can be toxic to the neurological system. Additionally, unhealthy pathogenic bacteria, viruses, and parasites may not be adequately filtered from sewage on lots of less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre.

"Septic tank regulation is a tough issue," said Secretary Curry. "It hits people where they live and where they raise their families. But neglecting this responsibility would put these families at risk. Better septic tank regulation and enforcement will help protect the health of families all over rural New Mexico."

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Recent water testing in the Village of Jacona in Northern Santa Fe County gives an example of the threats posed by improperly functioning septic tanks on small lots. One half of the wells tested in a recent random sampling had detectable levels of coliform. This village does not have a public sewer system and many homes are situated on lots of less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre in size.

The Department will initially focus on permittees seeking septic tanks near highly vulnerable waters. These include:

- an aquifer with known anthropogenic anoxic or nitrate contamination;
- an aquifer overlain by fractured bedrock;
- an aquifer in karst terrain;
- a gaining stream known to be impacted by nutrients from liquid waste systems; or
- a water-table aquifer (includes both unconfined and semi-confined conditions) with a vadose zone thickness of 100 feet or less containing no soil or rock formation that would act as a barrier to saturated or unsaturated wastewater flow.

Where traditional septic systems are deemed inadequate, the Department will require the installation of an advanced treatment system. In addition, permit conditions will include both a supplier's repair and replacement warranty for a minimum of two years and two years of quarterly monitoring.

"Buyers of lots that are less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre should be advised that installation of advanced treatment systems are generally more expensive than conventional systems," said Secretary Curry. "Advanced treatment systems also require factory-authorized technicians for routine maintenance and more maintenance generally than conventional systems. While this will mean higher costs to the homeowner, that is the price we have to pay to protect our water and the health of our families."

Anyone interested in purchasing or building on a lot that is smaller than $\frac{3}{4}$ acre should contact their local NMED field office to review the permit procedure and determine whether they are in an area of concern. A licensed installer/contractor should also be contacted for an estimate of the increased costs associated with the installation and maintenance of advanced treatment systems. A list of current approved advanced systems is available at each of the 23 NMED field offices around New Mexico.

Existing permitted systems on less than $\frac{3}{4}$ acre lots will not be required to be replaced with advanced treatment systems at this time.

NMED also encourages communities to explore opportunities available to them to fund regional and/or local water and sewer systems. These systems provide the best resource and health protection for community residents. In order to facilitate the construction of these systems, NMED along with the New Mexico Finance Authority and Federal Government makes tens of millions of dollars in grants and loans available each year.

For further information contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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